

PROPHET OF REGENERATION: ON TWO FASCIST READINGS OF KNUT HAMSUN

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It was an old-new, revolutionarily atavistic world, in which values linked to the idea of the individual (such as, let us say, truth, freedom, justice, reason) were sapped of every strength and cast aside ... not in some reactionary way that looked back to yesterday or the day before, but in a way that was tantamount to humanity's being transferred, along with all these new ideas, back into the theocratic situations and conditions of the Middle Ages. That was no more reactionary than the path around a sphere – which, of course, leads around or back around it – can be termed regressive. There you had it: regress and progress, the old and the new, past and present – all became one, and the political right coalesced more and more with the left.

– Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 387-388

Any contemporary critical approach to Hamsun's literature and fascism enters a terrain of research that has also been the subject of extended public debate, with positions ranging from various versions of ideology critique to differing examples of apology. In the foreword to the English translation of Lyotard's book about Heidegger, another politically problematic and contentiously debated figure from the modernist period, David Carroll articulates a stance that can easily travel to the case of Hamsun. He writes:

Given that neither Heidegger's involvement with 'Nazism' nor his thought can be considered negligible ... the

problem for us today is that a ‘great thinker,’ at least for a certain period and in a certain way, was also a Nazi ... Our problem today is also how to continue to read Heidegger in a critical way: that is, in terms of the complexity of his thought and its implications *and* in terms of the seriousness of his involvement with Nazism and its consequences as well.” (Carroll xviii)

If we replace “thought” with “literature,” and “thinker” with “writer,” this formulation nicely encapsulates the double challenge of reading Hamsun today, in a critical way. Rather than dealing with Hamsun directly, this article examines texts by two writers who read Hamsun in a particularly *uncritical* way: that is, in terms of their own investments in National Socialism. The texts in question were written about Hamsun by the novelist Finn Halvorsen and the neglected modernist poet Åsmund Sveen during the Second World War, when all three of them were supporting the Nazi occupation of Norway. In what terms did Sveen and Halvorsen perceive a connection between Hamsun’s literature and his fascist sympathies? (The term ‘fascism,’ unlike ‘Nazism,’ includes Hamsun’s espousal of Mussolini and Quisling as well Hitler and Goebbels.)¹ Their texts reveal that these authors viewed Hamsun’s entire authorship as a dually revolutionary and reactionary revolt against bourgeois materialism, rationalism, and liberalism. They praised Hamsun’s utopian political and ethical vision of a post-decadent and rejuvenated Norway and Europe, aligning his work with their own historical mission. Halvorsen and Sveen thus allow us to approach the Hamsun problem from an unfamiliar and compromised perspective. Reading these Norwegian National Socialist texts reveals a set of forgotten assumptions

¹ Hamsun wrote of Mussolini: “[Han] skulle jeg nok hat lyst til å nedlægge min høje beundring og dype ærbødighet for – Gud nåde os for en kar midt i vår forvirrede tid!” (Kolloen 122)

about Hamsun's significance that, though usually distant, are also at times disturbingly familiar.

In the inter-war period, Finn Halvorsen wrote several novels, was a literary critic in *Morgenbladet* and *Aftenposten*, and translated Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg*. During the occupation, he was put in charge of *Nasjonal Samling*'s theater policies, with the task to 'nazify' cultural life in Norway (Sørgaard 20). Åsmund Sveen, perhaps the more interesting of the two, was a poet and critic in the thirties whose expressionistic and (homo)erotic texts were acclaimed as some of the most innovative work of the decade. He then became a prominent cultural bureaucrat and propagandist for *Nasjonal Samling* during the war. To situate their texts in relation to contemporary fascist studies, I will look to the historian Roger Griffin, the author of *The Nature of Fascism* (1991) and *Modernism and Fascism* (2006). There are two major features of fascist discourse to be emphasized in the texts by Halvorsen and Sveen: first, the idea of nationalist regeneration or what Griffin calls *palingenesis*, and second, the combination of traditional political categories of left and right, or "a synthesis of the revolutionary and the restorative" in the words of the historian Richard J. Evans (461).

"Palingenesis," meaning rebirth or regeneration, is the central term in Griffin's influential definition of generic fascism. Griffin argues that the core motivating myth of a future utopia based on national or racial palingenesis can define European fascism in its various forms. The future-oriented drive toward renewal in fascism was inspired by extreme dissatisfaction with the disenchanting and dislocating dynamics of capitalist modernity. Fascist ideology's version of anti-capitalism has been described as affective and romantic, rather than materialist or socio-historical (Paxton 10). For Griffin, fascist palingenetic myth looks to real or imagined historical precedents in a given national context to inform its vision of the cleansed utopian order. To quote two of Griffin's helpful formulations:

Fascism is a genus of modern politics which aspires to bring about a total revolution in the political and social culture of a particular national or ethnic community ... Generic fascism draws its internal cohesion and affective driving force from a core myth that a period of perceived decadence and degeneracy is imminently or eventually to give way to one of rebirth and rejuvenation in a post-liberal new order. (“The Primacy of Culture” 24)

Fascism ... seeks to conquer political power in order to realize a totalizing vision of national or ethnic rebirth. Its ultimate end is to overcome the decadence that has destroyed a sense of communal belonging and drained modernity of meaning and transcendence and [to] usher in a new era of cultural homogeneity and health. (*Modernism and Fascism* 182)

Griffin’s ideal type of fascist ideology, with its core myth of palingenesis, is heuristically very useful in that it encompasses many previously observed aspects of fascism, including its ‘anti-character’¹ – it is anti-bourgeois, anti-rationalist, anti-proletarian, anti-liberalist, and anti-materialist – while also explaining the somewhat paradoxical notion of revolutionary restoration.

Whereas the prevailing tendency in Hamsun criticism has been to construe fascism as univocally backwards-looking, regressive, or nostalgic, theorists like Griffin emphasize a notion of conservative or reactionary revolution to understand the structure of fascist thought. Phrases like “neither left nor right” and “neither modern nor anti-modern” appear often in writings on fascism to denote its illegibility in terms of traditional political categories or temporalities (*Modernism and Fascism* 347). Especially in its early stages as an ideological formation, fascism was ambiguous in terms of the traditional left-right political spectrum (Paxton 11). The temporal and political doubling inherent in these notions of

¹ Linz, 16

revolutionary reaction also brings to mind Hamsun's own approving description of August Strindberg as a "reactionary radical" in the 1890s ("Lidt om Strindberg" 21). In *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde*, Peter Osborne has discussed the political importance of notions like 'conservative revolution' or 'revolutionary reaction' in a way that is highly relevant to Hamsun, and especially to a novel like *Markens Grøde*:

Conservative revolution is a form of revolutionary *re-action*. It understands that what it would 'conserve' is already lost (if indeed it ever existed, which is doubtful) and hence must be created anew. It recognizes that under such circumstances the chance presents itself to realize this 'past' *for the first time*. The fact that the past is imaginary is thus no impediment to its political force, but rather its very condition (myth). (Osborne 164)

Hamsun's affinity to fascism, and also Sveen's and Halvorsen's, should be understood in terms of this mythic use of a vanished or imagined past to construct a political alternative to liberal modernity.

With this model of fascism in mind, I now turn to Finn Halvorsen's text on Hamsun, which is found in a collection of lectures held on NRK in the winter of 1942-1943 called *Nasjonalsosialister i norsk dikting*. Halvorsen portrays Hamsun as a standard-bearer for the new fascist age, leading his people "to the land of the future" (Halvorsen 9). It is widely noted in scholarship on fascism that the fascists felt they were heralding the dawn of a new civilization, for example Mussolini's 'fascist century.' As Zeev Sternhell writes, such a new age was to be "nothing less than a counter-civilization, defining itself as a revolution of man, a 'total revolution,' a 'spiritual revolution,' a 'revolution of morals'" (Sternhell 337). Halvorsen discerns a new political and social vision mirrored in Hamsun's "dikteriske og etiske holdning," even when Hamsun is not specifically engaged

in politics or tendentious writing (Halvorsen 9). In this way, Halvorsen claims all of Hamsun – whom he calls “the greatest writer of the twentieth century” – for the new fascist age on the basis of aesthetic and ethical, in addition to political, values.

Looking back to what he sees as Hamsun’s true authorial debut, *Fra det moderne Amerikas Åndsliv*, from 1889, Halvorsen praises its criticism of America as “det demokratiske pøbelveldes gylne land, hvor friheten er bundet og rettferdigheten død. Dets guder heter Mammon og Humbug” (13). Halvorsen reads this as Hamsun’s prognostic recognition of the decadent materialism of American society that has since become apparent in “Amerikas holdning under det rooseveltske jøderegime” (13). This line will perhaps call to mind Hamsun’s own 1942 publication in the Axis periodical *Berlin-Rom-Tokio*, in which he notoriously described Roosevelt as “en jøde i jødisk tjeneste, den førende ånd i Amerikas krig for gullet og jødemakten” (Hermundstad 259). Halvorsen acclaims Hamsun’s alternative to the degenerate capitalist and materialist modernity of American society: “det reinlinjete og positive livssyn som han skulde komme til å bygge hele sin diktning på” (Halvorsen 13). He locates this life-view in *Sult* and all of Hamsun’s subsequent fiction, seeing it as a rejection of naturalist pessimism in favor of a “livsberust” and “livsnære” vitalistic optimism, with a romantic subjectivity close to “jomfruelig norsk natur” (14-15). In this way, Halvorsen’s fascist reading appropriates the aesthetic values of Hamsun’s neo-romantic or modernist works for his own racist politics of regeneration.

As Halvorsen’s essay continues constructing Hamsun as a paradigm for the new fascist age, he moves from the 1890s to the early twentieth century, when Hamsun’s “forkynnelse” becomes even more explicit (15). The romantic wanderer comes out of the woods and into modern society, writes Halvorsen, and he does not like what he sees: “for hvor han hadde ventet å finne veksten, der møtte han forfallet” (16). Perceiving modernity as decay,

Hamsun's novels in the teens diagnose the ills of industrial and bourgeois-liberal pseudo-progress; as an alternative they offer what Halvorsen calls "arbeidets, sunnhetens og fruktbarhetens evige verdi" (16). Halvorsen thus places Hamsun in the familiar position of reactionary observer and critic of modernity's sterility and decline; crucially, he also extols Hamsun's 'optimistic' role as a prophet of renewal based on "visdom om jorda og blodet" (17). Here we see the shift from degeneration to utopian renewal that is so common in fascist discourses.

In addition to its critique of degeneration and the sterility of contemporary bourgeois civilization, fascism also had a virile and regenerative side. Sternhell locates this in its praise of youth and health, which informed its desired alternative to the decadence of liberal/bourgeois modernity. Quoting first Mussolini and then Giovanni Gentile, Sternhell explains: "fascist ideology saw itself as a reaction against the 'materialistic positivism of the nineteenth century,' which it sought to replace by a 'religious and idealistic manner of looking at life'" (338). As seen in its recommendation of the barbarian and the primitive, fascism's counter-civilization and anti-bourgeois ethos enacted a revolt against perceived degeneration that also included a utopian longing for rejuvenation:

Fascism, young, new, and modern, was also a revolt against decadence, and here, too, it was echoing one of the main themes of the movement of revolt of the latter years of the nineteenth century.... The fascist ... saw himself as liberating the world from the bourgeois spirit and awakening a desire for reaction and regeneration that were simultaneously spiritual and physical, moral, social, and political. (339)

The revitalizing and regenerative component of fascism that Sternhell identifies here has been characteristically central for Griffin. As previously mentioned, in Griffin's account the diverse negations associated with fascism cohere around a core utopian

myth of nationalist or ethnic renewal (palingenesis) after an era of perceived degeneration. In Sveen's political writings, such as "Hvorfor jeg er medlem av NS," one sees this appeal of fascism clearly: he wrote that it offered a new idealistic and quasi-spiritual political vision, which was revolutionary and utopian even as it embraced the pre-modern and the primitive as future alternatives to the capitalist and materialist present.

Sveen's text on Hamsun is part of an article he wrote about writers from Hålogaland, the pre-Christian kingdom in Northern Norway that was apparently romanticized by Norwegian fascists, especially those with neo-pagan interests. Like Halvorsen, Sveen sees Hamsun's work as heralding a new age in art and life ("å varsle inn ei ny tid i kunsten og livet"), whether it does so through a neo-romantic or neo-realist aesthetic, the traditional descriptions of the early and late Hamsun that Sveen utilizes (Sveen 221). In a key passage, Sveen writes that Hamsun was "var alltid revolusjonær og konservativ":

I ungdomen gjorde han oppreist mot den materialistiske, borgarlige naturalismen – mot den reiste han naturmystikken og det frie, einsame mennesket som vandrar sin eigen veg under stjernene. I manndomen tok han striden opp med proletariseringa og den oppløysande liberalismen. Mot denne utviklinga sette han arbeidet med jorda, dei eviga samfunnslovene, det opphavlege skapande arbeidet. Alltid er det *livet* – på jorda og i mennesket – han kjemper for, mot forflating og utarming og mekanisering." (Sveen 222)

Hamsun's authorship is here claimed for the fascist cult of life, health, and nature against both bourgeois and proletarian materialism. Sveen's Hamsun is a blend of conservative and revolutionary who not only embodies fascism's negations, but also points the way forward to a nationalist and vitalistic triumph over the age of banalization and spiritual impoverishment. Along these

lines, Sveen edited a propaganda anthology of Norwegian literary history during the war, based the idea of an authentic national tradition that would provide values opposed to the degenerate anti-culture of capitalist modernity. It was called *Norsk ånd og vilje*: a version of the national literary tradition that included Eddic poetry, Bjørnson, Ibsen, Hamsun, and speeches by Quisling.

Like Sveen, Halvorsen's text views Hamsun as a revolutionary seer whose literature presages regeneration after the period of dissolution its diagnoses. In the following quotation, Halvorsen provides an exemplary instance of the discourse of national and 'European' palingenesis:

Lenge før natten var begynt å lette, så han den dagen i møte som no rødmer over fjellene. Ut fra sin profetiske seerevne vet han at Norge skal reise seg stort av asken og få sin stolte plass i et nytt og lykkelig Europa. De siste huggene den gamle stridsmann med høg og løftet panne har gitt, er derfor også for den norske og den europeiske kulturs redningsmenn, Vidkun Quisling og Adolf Hitler. (Halvorsen 17)

Notice the continuity that Halvorsen claims for Hamsun's political interventions throughout his authorship, making the most recent blows struck for fascism and Nazism seem coherently in line with the earlier ones of "the old warrior" – such as his early polemics against literary naturalism and positivism. This citation epitomizes the core fascist palingenetic myth with its image of the night receding before the new dawn of a healthy Europe.

Regenerative imagery can of course be found in many ideologies or belief systems, but in fascism it supports what Griffin calls "projects of national, social, racial or cultural cleansing" that are "designed to bring about collective redemption, a new national community, a new society, a new man" (*Modernism and Fascism* 8). This rebirth would disrupt the modern society fascists perceived as spiritually sterile, degenerate,

and on the verge of an apocalyptic collapse. In the typical fascist imagination of such a utopian break, a new order would emerge from the ruins of the collapse – observe Norway’s phoenix-like rise from the ashes in Halvorsen’s description of the future of Europe. In a chilling remark based in his delusion that a new fascist age was imminent, Sveen wrote in 1943 that “viljen til sammenføring, syntese, harmoni ... først må bevirke en rensningsprosess, en storm i verden, [som] er historisk nødvendig. At stormen virker på oss nærsynte mennesker som kaos og vold er også naturlig” (Gatland 152). Unconscionably, Sveen uses the fascist rhetoric of apocalypse and rebirth to justify the “cleansing process” around him from an arrogantly assumed perspective of historical necessity. Incidentally, in the fascist newspaper Rolf Jacobsen edited during the occupation, he refers to this collapse and rebirth as “Ragnarok,” which was also the name of a neo-pagan Norwegian fascist journal in the thirties and forties.¹ This use of Ragnarok, the final battle and twilight of the gods in Norse mythology, displays how fascists often found informing narratives of destruction and regeneration in their own national-cultural past.

In the light of Griffin’s influential model of fascist discourse, this article has called attention to the utopian rhetoric of palingenesis and the supposed synthesis of left and right, and of progress and regression, as key features in these Norwegian fascist texts about Hamsun. My motive in examining these texts by Sveen and Halvorsen has been to recover a sense of how Hamsun’s fascism appeared from what we might call an inside perspective. As the classic interpreter of fascism George L. Mosse writes in his book *The Fascist Revolution*, considering fascism “as a cultural movement means seeing fascism as it saw itself and as its followers saw it, to attempt to understand the movement on its

¹ See for example “Etter krigen.” *Kongsvinger Arbeiderbladet* 16 April, 1941. Here, Jacobsen writes that “etter Ragnarok skal der bygges opp en sosial stat.”

own terms” (Mosse x). Of course, this approach is not an apologetic exercise that would make such political views more palatable or ignore their atrocious outcomes. This approach does, however, provide a sense of fascism’s utopian appeal to intellectuals or writers who were preoccupied by the discontents and decay of modern civilization, and it also amends common assumptions about the simply nostalgic or regressive cultural projects of fascist intellectuals. As the historian Tony Judt has recently written: “There is much to be said for consigning defunct dogmas to the dustbin of history, particularly when they have been responsible for so much suffering. But we pay a price: the allegiances of the past – and thus the past itself – become utterly incomprehensible.” (Judt 15) Without some attempt to imagine the seductions of these dogmas, the political allegiance of a figure like Hamsun remains merely enigmatic.

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